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SUBJECT: HASINA DOUBTS GOVERNMENT SINCERITY ON ELECTIONS

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia Butenis, reason para 1.4 d.

¶1. (C) Summary. Awami League president Hasina says she fears the government will delay elections until a "king's" party can be guaranteed a large majority, but she insists she has no interest in agitating for elections or an end to the ban on political activity. She called on the government to follow her lead and the law on electoral reforms, declared that her party should be hailed for standing up to five years of "terror" under the last regime, and blamed the Bangladesh Nationalist Party for the political deadlock that produced the January 11 state of emergency. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On May 16, the Ambassador paid her farewell call on Awami League president Sheikh Hasina. Party Secretary General Abdul Jalil, Political Secretary Saber Chowdhury, and poloff (notetaker) sat in.

¶3. (C) Hasina stated she and her party are doing nothing now because of the ban on political activity. The government has given up trying to control her movements and access, but she is lying low, foregoing travel outside of Dhaka because of the large crowds of supporters she would attract. She refused to speculate about the future of Khaleda Zia or the Bangladesh Nationalist Party.

¶4. (C) Pressure from the Awami Leauge-led alliance propelled the current government to power with a mandate to hold elections, she said, but after four months it had failed even to decide how to develop a new voter list. The government, she stated, should follow the constitution and the path staked out by the Awami League's electoral reform programs articulated over the past two years. "We have shown them the way."

¶5. (C) Hasina expressed doubt the government is sincere about elections. Recalling what she said was a similar situation during the rule of Generals Zia and Ershad, Hasina worried that the government will try to rig the electoral process to produce the two-thirds parliamentary majority "king's" parties expect to compensate for their lack of legitimacy. "We don't want to repeat that cycle," she said. but noted with concern the new party she said the military is trying to create with opportunists and threats tied to a politically-biased and -driven anti-corruption campaign.

¶6. (C) Hasina alluded to criticism of her rule from four senior leaders while she was abroad, but affirmed the party is solidly united under her leadership after her return to Dhaka. "Defectors can't hurt us because we are not a party, we are an institution." She parried calls for internal party reform by saying her party is in perpetual reform as reflected by its various electoral reform proposals.

¶7. (C) Hasina emotionally rejected the Ambassador's probe on whether the Awami League felt it had made any mistakes in its political strategy, arguing that her party should be hailed for standing up to five years of "terror" propagated by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party government. She also bristled at the Ambassador's observation that people blamed both parties for the deadlock that produced the January 11 state of emergency, saying all of the fault lay with her political rivals.

¶8. (C) Asked if she had contacts with the military, Hasina recalled that prior to her travel to the U.S. in March she had pledged to respect all actions taken by the current government. She indicated there had been no contact since her return to Dhaka but that she is open to renewed dialogue.

¶9. (C) Comment: Relaxed and upbeat, Hasina is in no rush to challenge the government. She appears confident of her position in the party and the country, and believes that popular opinion will in time turn against the government as the result of rising prices and other problems. In response to the Ambassador's query, she said she would welcome dialogue with the Election Commission but complained there had been no outreach, even over the Commission's recent decision to register voters in camps instead of by door-to-door canvassing. We are noting to government officials that the Awami League is telling people it fears for the integrity of the electoral process, a viewpoint that will resonate more and more unless the government articulates a clear and credible electoral road map

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